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# **Social Exclusion, Neoliberalism and Resistance: the role of social workers in implementing social policies in Chile**

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## **Abstract**

The views of social workers in Chile are rarely heard and considered in the policy debates. This article addresses this lacuna by examining discourses of social exclusion and underlying assumptions held by social workers with responsibility for implementing social policy interventions in Chile. It draws upon the findings of a study involving interviews with senior social workers from two large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) tackling social exclusion. We found that individual-based narratives and neoliberal rationality are dominant in the implementation of Chilean social policy. At the same time, anti-hegemonic strategies pursued by some social workers were also identified. Such an approach is highly relevant in the Chilean context, in which power imbalances remain almost untouched since the return of democratic regimes in the 1990s. The study findings pose diverse challenges to Chilean social policy and social work professional training. The necessity of promoting transformative imaginations that favour collective practices of resistance is identified to counteract, through a critical discourse, the neoliberal rationale, its rhetoric and practices affecting excluded people's lives.

**Key words:** social exclusion, neoliberalism, resistance, social workers, social policy.

## Introduction

Social exclusion became the subject of debate in France during the 1960s, where academics, activists, politicians and journalists started to refer to those people in poverty and not covered by the social security system as “the excluded” (Silver, 1994). Subsequently, the concept was used to capture those people presenting a weakening or rupture of bonds in relation to mainstream society, referring to multiple deprivations and inequities experienced by them (Taket et al., 2009). But it was in the 1990s when the concept was located as a core element in European Union social policy. The European Commission adopted the term social exclusion to replace the notion of poverty in the 1990s (Room, 1995). Use of the term subsequently spread throughout many supranational organisations to other parts of the globe including developing countries (United Nations, 2010).

Despite the decline of the concept of social exclusion in European social policy in recent years (Pierson, 2016), in Chile it has had a prominent role in debates about the development of social policies since the return of democratic regimes in the 1990s (Leyton and Muñoz, 2016). Overcoming not only poverty but social exclusion, and promoting social integration, have been some of the most relevant ideas underlying social policy, in a context where social bonds had been broken by the political and economic consequences of the Pinochet dictatorship (1973-1990). Indeed, the concept of social exclusion has proliferated in most of the documents guiding the implementation of social policy since the 1990s onwards (CEPAL, 2015).

As the academic literature suggests, social exclusion is an elastic and polysemic notion, which may serve different ideological purposes that originate from a variety of discourses. Drawing upon the findings of a qualitative study, this article examines the discourses on social exclusion and underlying assumptions held by social workers working in non-governmental organisations (NGOs) with responsibility for implementing social policy in Chile, and analyses the way in which these approaches are translated into interventions. From the critical policy studies approach adopted here, the relevance of studying discourses underpinning social policies lies in the belief that problematising the way we understand social problems can give place to new approaches in practice which may contribute to the promotion of social justice (Bacchi, 2012). By confronting our own understandings we may become aware of inconsistencies and contradictions between our own belief systems and actions, which can contribute to improving the implementation of social policies that affect those most excluded from society (Martínez and Agüero, 2016).

The article is organised into five further sections. The theoretical framework on social exclusion, neoliberalism and resistance that guided the research is discussed in the next section, followed by an overview of Chilean social policy and social workers' role in such a context. The methods of the study are then outlined, before its main findings are presented and discussed. To conclude, the article reflects on the findings and the challenges they pose to Chilean social policy and social work training.

### **Social exclusion as discourse, neo-liberalism and resistance**

A vast literature on social exclusion has been produced since the global proliferation of the concept since 1990s. On a descriptive level, the multi-dimensional, complex, dynamic and relative nature of social exclusion are some of its most commonly agreed characteristics, but these also make it difficult to define (Pierson, 2016).

Embracing any notion of social exclusion entails the adoption of a theoretical and ideological position. In this vein, Room (1995) distinguished two broad analytical traditions of social exclusion which took place in Europe during the last century: a continental, more specifically French tradition, which emphasises the detachment of individuals and collectives from a moral order, and an Anglo-Saxon, more specifically British tradition, which focuses on the disparities in the distribution of life chances that generate poverty. Social exclusion has been observed as a flexible term which can be employed to support different and even contradictory political purposes. In this regard, Silver (1994: 536-541) asserted that the discourse of exclusion “may serve as a window through which to view political cultures [...] The different meanings of social exclusion and the uses to which the term is put is embedded in conflicting social science paradigms and political ideologies”.

Silver (1994) identified three paradigms to understand social exclusion. The solidarity paradigm, views social exclusion as the result of the weakening or breakage of solidarity bonds, emphasising the ways in which cultural or moral boundaries between groups socially construct dualistic categories for ordering the world. This approach, related to French republicanism, proposes that social exclusion needs to be tackled by the state, promoting moral integration through insertion. This can imply assimilation of the individuals into the dominant culture to keep the social order or the promotion of intercultural exchanges (depending on whether Durkheimian or the multicultural approach is adopted). The specialisation approach, the second paradigm identified by Silver, sees social exclusion as a consequence of social differentiation and the economic division of labour. This perspective, which is underpinned by Anglo-American liberalism, considers

that the social order consists of networks of voluntary exchanges between autonomous and competing individuals in a free market environment. In contrast, the third paradigm called monopoly, focuses on the structural causes of social exclusion rather than on the individuals' behaviour. From this approach social exclusion is produced from the formation of group monopoly, and serves the interests of the included. Social order, from this view, is seen as coercive, imposed through a set of hierarchical power relations.

Analysing Labour Party policies in the United Kingdom in the 1990s, Levitas (2005) proposed another typology to understand the diverse and contested nature of social exclusion: redistributionist discourse (RED); moral underclass discourse (MUD); and social integrationist discourse (SID). RED, developed in British critical social policy, is similar to the Silver's monopoly paradigm. From such a structural approach, poverty is understood as the prime cause of social exclusion. Its concern with poverty is embedded in a critique of inequality, addressing the exclusionary processes in all areas of society which result in imbalances of power and resources that divide it. Combating exclusion implies redistributing wealth (e.g. through increasing social security benefits and a more redistributive tax structure), and power (by promoting citizenship as the exercise of civil, political and social rights).

On the contrary, MUD is based on a neoliberal rationality. It focuses on individuals as responsible for their own exclusion rather than the social structure that produces exclusionary processes. People are excluded because they do not fit with the morally accepted social order (for example, in terms of work and family ethics). Benefits for the poorest –the so-called underclass- are problematised as promoting a culture of dependency. On the other hand, SID also highlights individuals' responsibilities in the overcoming social exclusion, as it understands exclusion occurring through the lack of participation in paid work.

From a critical social policy approach as the adopted in this research, social exclusion is underpinned by power imbalances and inequality resulting from the adoption of the neoliberal model, in a similar vein as explained in Silver's monopoly paradigm and Levitas's RED. Neoliberalism is a variant of liberal thought which exacerbates economic liberalisation through market freedom, deregulation, privatisation and competition, which has been installed as a new hegemonic discourse on a global scale (Harvey, 2007; Peck, 2010; Eagleton-Pierce, 2016). The hegemonic nature of neoliberalism lies in its capacity to penetrate not only the economic but also the cultural and social domains of life by colonising the common-sense way people interpret, live in, and understand the world, operating as an ethic in itself (Harvey, 2007). Such a neoliberal hegemony, following

Gramsci (1981), is underpinned by structural mechanisms that enable domination and configuration of the political, intellectual, and moral life of some groups of the population. The hegemonic nature of neoliberalism, from this perspective, needs to be understood not as the simple and lineal domination of privileged sectors of society over passive masses, but as the construction of cross-class alliances and consensus which need the active involvement of hegemonised groups (Garrett, 2013). This perspective enables us to develop a focus on neoliberalism which goes beyond pessimistic approaches that see its hegemony as an inevitable (Salvat, 2002). In fact, Gramsci (1981) highlights the possibility of constructing counter-hegemony, an alternative which is underpinned by the belief that agency and collective political action can affect structural mechanisms that produce oppression. In other words, resistance to neoliberalism is entirely possible (Prior and Barnes, 2011; Deepak, 2011; Garrett, 2013; Clarke et al., 2014).

Resistance, in the context of policy implementation, refers to the collective and deliberate acts to make socio-political changes which are undertaken in opposition to a belief, an ideology or a practice which is oppressive, unjust or leads to the reinforcement of inequality (Prior and Barnes, 2011; Kim, 2014). It is always a form of challenging hegemonic power; hence the strategic knowledge of power is necessary for effective resistance. Exerting resistance means to critically examine global neoliberal hegemonic norms, which emphasise individualism and consumerism. In policy implementation, the counter-hegemonic vision, as Deepak (2011) asserts, is of inclusion, solidarity, and the promotion of collective projects.

Mechanisms of resistance from the practice of social work professionals implementing social policy are diverse and do not necessarily involve immediate and radical social transformation. They may involve minor transgressions of rules and/or advocacy for change or may address more structural targets by diffusing ideas in the public space (Baines, 2008), as well as influencing changes in policy and legislation (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013). As presented in the following section, this approach to resistance as a viable alternative in policy implementation is particularly relevant for Chilean social workers, as the profession was abruptly affected by the imposition of the neoliberal model during the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s and as the consequences of neoliberalism unfolded over the next four decades.

## **Policy context and social work practice in Chile**

Chile has been considered the “laboratory” of neoliberalism around the world (Harvey, 2007, Yeates, 2014; Gaudichaud, 2015). Under the cloak of Pinochet’s dictatorship, the so-called ‘Chicago Boys’ -a group of 30 Chilean economists trained at the University of Chicago by Milton Friedman- led the imposition of the most extreme version of the neoliberal doctrine in the early 1980s (Garretón, 2012). In such a context, a rapid process of privatisation and deregulation of the market along with a reduction of the state’s role in social policy were imposed. The dismantling of social services, which had been developed by the previous governments of Salvador Allende (Socialist Party) and Eduardo Frei Montalva (Christian Democratic Party), followed the drastic reduction of social expenditure and the targeting of social programmes to extreme poverty sectors only (Raczynski, 1994). These and other measures that configured the core of the neoliberal turn in Chile were adopted in a context of suppression of all political rights and the repression of all types of collective action (Harvey, 2007; Garretón, 2012).

In such a context, many schools of social work in the higher education sector were closed because they were considered a source of radical ideas and subversion. The critical approach underpinning social work curricula developed by social workers in previous decades, mainly influenced by structural-marxist literature, was rapidly repressed. Even social work books and dissertations were burned as a means of censorship (Castañeda and Salamé, 2014). Many social workers, social work students, and academics ‘disappeared’, or were tortured and killed due to their opposition to the Pinochet regime during the 1980s (Ávila and Bivort, 2017).

The re-establishment of democratic regimes in 1990 is identified as a new stage in the development of social policy and social work in Chile (Saavedra, 2015). Political rights were gradually restored, and the reconstruction of trust and civic engagement become an urgent task for the new government (Barros et al., 1996). To differentiate from the poverty approach (understood as lack of income) employed during the dictatorship era, the democratic coalition adopted the notion of social exclusion – similar to the French tradition - “which enabled the development of a focus on the rupture of bonds that tie the individual with society” (Ministry of Planning, 2002: 44). By the mid-1990s, the term social exclusion had emerged as an important concept, which enabled “[the understanding] of poverty as social exclusion, which adds the social, cultural and political to the income dimension” (NCOP, 1996: 168). This new approach resulted in the creation of new social programmes which would be implemented by social workers and targeted to “vulnerable sectors” experiencing poverty and social exclusion (Ministry of Planning, 2002).

Despite the attempts of post-dictatorial governments to recover the state's role and repair the ruptures in social bonds produced by the dictatorship, the neoliberal ethos has remained as the cornerstone of the Chilean model of development. The out-sourcing of social policy interventions, by which the private sector (including profit and non-profit organisations, mainly NGOs) became involved in the delivery of social policy is an example of that, along with the intensification of the privatisation of higher education (Garretón, 2012). In the case of the social work profession, this resulted in the abrupt increase in private higher education institutions delivering social work programmes throughout the country, the tripling of the number of social workers in the labour market, and the considerable decrease in social workers' salaries (Cortés and Calderón, 2014).

It needs to be recognised that as NGOs have become increasingly dependent on the state for funding over the last decades, social workers employed in these organisations started to experience labour instability and precariousness (a position that still characterises their labour conditions) (Pavez and Leiva, 2014). As social interventions have a relatively short span (generally between 12 and 24 months), and state funding covers only the award period, social workers are contracted on a fixed term basis with no access to social security and may have periods without a salary.

Currently, the social policy approach on poverty and social exclusion has adopted remains similar, although the incorporation of the notions of risk and protection have gained relevance since the creation of the Social Protection System in 2000 (Leyton and Muñoz, 2016). Following the World Bank's approach (Holzmann and Jørgensen, 2000), the success of social policy interventions is measured according to a set of outcomes defined for each family with individual family members being targeted. Despite these orientations, these guidelines merely indicate the goals to be achieved in the intervention process; they do not dictate how the intervention should be conducted, which suggests that there may be some room for manoeuvre by social workers to exert discretion during the implementation process (Leyton, 2015).

Nowadays, the Social Protection System organises the structure of social services provision in Chile. It is formed by four sub-systems coordinated at the national level: integrated protection for children; support and care for dependant adults and children; family programmes; and community health programmes. All these interventions aim to address social exclusion by promoting the social integration of diverse groups of the population which also experience income poverty (Ministry of Social Development, 2017). Following the approach initiated in the 1990s, the sub-systems and their associated programmes are implemented by NGOs in local areas, from which many social workers



are employed to design and implement individual and family intervention plans in the frontline.

### **The study**

The article draws on a study investigating how social workers implementing interventions designed to address social exclusion understood such a notion and approached their practices. In total, 26 semi-structured interviews were carried out with senior social workers employed by two large national NGOs whose programmes aim to address poverty and social exclusion: the Home of Christ (HOC) and the Foundation for Overcoming Poverty (FOP). The investigation focused on social workers occupying senior positions (managers or programme coordinators), as it was assumed that the room for manoeuvre they enjoy as senior professionals, would enable them to incorporate their own ideas, values and approaches within the intervention process. The study included 19 female and 7 male social workers; most of them graduated from 1990 and 2000. Three of them implemented interventions in the north zone of Chile, 11 in the centre and 12 in the south. Following data saturation (Silverman, 2016), thematic analysis was conducted with a focus on not only the semantic content of data, but also its latent meaning (e.g. underlying ideas, assumptions, conceptualisations, ideologies and so forth) (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

In addition, documentary analysis of the two organisations' written material was carried out in two phases, before and after conducting interviews (Ritchie et al., 2013). This facilitated an examination of how interventions had been planned and understood by social workers and their organisations. It included the analysis of publicly available materials such as projects, reports, theoretical frameworks, guidelines for practice, and evaluation instruments. Documentary analysis prior to conducting the fieldwork enabled the contextualisation of interviews and the formulation of more pertinent questions. The analysis operated as a strategy for comparing social workers' views with their organisations' statements. This enabled the observation of differences, similarities and possible gaps between social workers and their organisational contexts. In addition, documents were also treated as data in their own right. After conducting interviews, specific documents suggested by the interviewees were also analysed to reach a deeper understanding of their interventions. By complementing interviews and documentary analysis, data were triangulated (Silverman, 2016). Ethical permission for the study was granted by the authors' organisation.

## Results and Discussion

A rhetoric emphasising structural processes was employed by social work professionals when reflecting on their understanding of social exclusion; they recognised the political, economic, and social power imbalances that are central to the neoliberal model. Simultaneously however, most social workers drew upon an individual-based discourse in which the solutions to social exclusion were seen as the responsibility of the individuals living disadvantaged lives. On the other hand, a small handful of participants, presented a more coherent analysis of social exclusion in terms of both cause and response, specifically through the deliberate employment of their professional discretion to undertake alternative practices to address power asymmetry at a local scale. Despite the differences observed between the individual-based and this more coherent structural discourse, all social workers agreed that connecting socially excluded individuals with the available social programmes was the main intervention strategy used to address social exclusion.

### *The individual-based discourses and the problems of eclecticism*

Despite most social workers recognising the involuntary nature of social exclusion and criticising neoliberalism as the ultimate cause of disadvantage, a conservative view of poor people's moral and economic behaviour was overwhelming emphasised. A general pattern emerged in which participants would initially draw from structural approaches on social exclusion (which cohere with the organisations' guidelines), but their answers then became blurred and frequently eclipsed by a belief that the responsibility for poverty and exclusion lay with the poor themselves. The transition between a view closer to Levitas's (2005) RED and an approach like MUD can be clearly observed in the statement of one interviewee:

*"[The cause of exclusion] is lack of opportunities, social injustice, and inequality. I believe that crime is a symptom of exclusion. Not to justify criminals or drug addicts, but if you look at their stories you realise that their families are disruptive, violent, with no values. Mum is in jail, dad is a drug addict, so there is no authority. Children grow up in that environment, learning everything on the street [...] the family does not give the values they should provide, so they learn a bad way of relating with others, which ultimately ends up excluding them from society."* (Female SW, 18, HOC)

Among those who emphasised moral imperatives, blaming poor people manifested in arguments that focused on a lack of moral guidance (what was described by participants as “spiritual poverty”), and/or as self-exclusion:

*“Exclusion for me is realising how opportunities are passing outside your house and not being able to participate and this is produced by our neoliberal model [...] but there are some problems with the poor as well. They live in spiritual poverty, they are indifferent, they do not want to participate, they do not want to help their neighbours...this also leads to their own exclusion.”* (Female SW, 9, FOP)

In a similar fashion, whilst still departing from a structural critique of neoliberal model as the ultimate cause of social exclusion, some interviewees expressed the view that the inability to consume material goods would lead to people feeling socially excluded:

*“Exclusion is generated by the neoliberal model, which indicates that we have to consume goods to take part in it. The excluded is the one who feels poor, who feels out of certain circles, who feels that they do not have resources to go to the shopping centre and buy something, or who feels that the house he/she owns is not what he/she expects and is not enough to live well with his/her children. I believe that is the one who feels excluded [...] to me exclusion does not exist, it has a lot to do with a perception.”* (Male SW, 2, HOC)

For these social workers the ultimate form of inclusion is through the consumption of goods and services. This explains why some proposed providing vouchers to poor people to enable them to purchase services such as health care, education and housing, yet at the same time criticised market rationality as the main cause of social exclusion. Their accounts stopped short of reflecting on the weakness of the state’s role in providing such services as universal social rights and illustrated how a market discipline is subtly imposed through discourse (Whitworth, 2016; Feldman, 2017; Shakespeare et al., 2016). Underlying these views, the structural conditions that generate exclusion were dismissed and an approach closer to the Silver’s (1994) specialisation paradigm emerged instead.

These findings show how eclectic and even inconsistent approaches co-exist within the views of some social workers. Discourses grounded in a critique of the neoliberal model, whilst at the same time focusing on the individual, were common among the interviewees - which suggests the need to critically examine the internal rationality of their accounts. Eclecticism is not new in social professions and neither does the problem lie in the

combination of diverse perspectives. Indeed, employing different approaches can be useful in some cases to address complex social phenomena (Payne, 2005). The problem with eclecticism emerges when perspectives are combined without a critical examination of their underlying assumptions and logical consequences in practice, and when eclecticism allows the ascendancy of oppressive perspectives to be hidden under apparently progressive and radical approaches as found in this study.

Eclecticism, Thompson (2010) asserts, can be the result of the avoidance of addressing the links between theory and practice. Some social workers reported that there were no opportunities to have meetings with other professionals to discuss the orientation of interventions. They acknowledged during the interview that this was the first time they had reflected on their practices, which suggests that their eclecticism was unplanned and a spontaneous way of organising ideas about interventions. The lack of group discussion may affect the capacity of the interviewees not only to reflect on the consistency of perspectives adopted and implemented in practice, but also to imagine possibilities for the transformation of the social, economic and political hegemonic order (Levitas, 2012).

### *Structural perspectives and the limits of intervention*

For some social workers social exclusion was conceived as the lack of universal social rights, representing a discourse that coheres with the French tradition of social exclusion as identified in Silver's (1994) monopoly paradigm, and the British tradition, as highlighted in Levitas's (2005) RED. They identified the denial of rights resulting from the implementation of the neoliberal model since the dictatorship period. Central to their ideas of social exclusion, was the issue of power. Specifically, they identified that practices of authoritarianism and clientelism (that is, the exchange of goods and services for political support), resulted in rights being used as a means to exchange political favours in rural and isolated areas.

In such context, social exclusion serves the interest of the political and economic elites and is characterised not only by a lack of income and inequality but also, and especially, a lack of voice and power (Baines, 2008; Álvarez Leguizamón, 2011; Choudhury, 2017). The role of social workers in these instances revolved around envisaging alternatives to counteract the damaging impact of neoliberalism; they saw themselves as introducing small, but effective, changes at a local scale (Baines, 2008; Prior and Barnes, 2011).

Despite the strength and consistency of this structural approach in discursive terms, the interviewees identified numerous difficulties related to the implementation of alternative

practices. Only a few social workers carried out initiatives in which the structural approach of social exclusion was put into practice. Although exceptional, these practices contributed, in their view, to challenging patronising relationships occurring in local areas through the promotion of citizen control:

*“I believe the programme contributes to strengthening citizen control practices, at the local level of course. Not in every intervention, in every community, but in some cases there are processes that are worth highlighting. In a community for instance, Mayor candidates commit to many things during their campaign. We have been supporting community organisations in demanding accountability. How much of what they promised has been done? That's something that didn't happen before in these communities.”* (Male SW, 16, FOP)

Such initiatives promoting citizen control represent a way of challenging dominant social policy perspectives. Specifically, power is understood as an attribute to be disputed and resisted through the promotion of citizen control, that is, the control that citizens can exert to govern a programme or an institution (Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013; Leyton and Muñoz, 2016). People experiencing poverty and social exclusion can, from this discursive perspective, not only participate in the policy implementation process but also demand that mayors and other public servants are accountable for policy decisions and outcomes in their territories. Considering that the guidelines provided by the Chilean state and the NGOs do not include the promotion of citizen control as a strategy to address social exclusion, these findings show that professional discretion can be used as a way of counteracting neoliberal rationality underlying social policy. However, the participants also acknowledged the limitations of their ability to challenge power through the promotion of citizen control. Community reluctance to get involved in the decision-making process; the lack of political will of authorities exerting power at the local scale, especially Mayors, to democratise the decision-making process; and the lack of skilled frontline professionals, were some of the obstacles of translating the approach into practice. The interviewees also highlighted that the very nature of social policy hinders the possibility to challenge power relationships, as it promotes individualism and competition between service users. That is clear in anti-poverty policies which offer funds for social organisations located in targeted communities. As the application for those funds is individual-based, the very policy promotes competition and distrust between neighbours. This limits the possibility of creating collective projects and, therefore, challenging power on a structural level.

Despite believing that the redistribution of power was a key strategy to tackle social exclusion, the study participants all recognised that, apart from a few exceptions, their interventions were limited mainly to linking service users with available social services and programmes which are part of the current Social Protection System.

### *Social exclusion and the focus on disconnection to social services*

Although the idea of social exclusion was approached by the social workers drawing upon these two broad and competing perspectives, they all agreed that their main strategy to address social exclusion in practice was connecting socially excluded people with the available social services or programmes. Participants, in referring to these so-called “networks” or “structure of opportunities”, described their role as mediator between service users and the structure of social services, a discourse that fits closer with the French tradition on social exclusion (Silver, 1994; Levitas, 2005; Pierson, 2016):

*“People are excluded because they do not know the benefits they can have. Most of our services users do not even have a national identity card. They do not know where the health service is located, how to apply for a subsidy or get a place in a school for their children [...] our work consists of connecting those people with the networks [...] we are like the bridge.”*  
(Female SW, 15, HOC)

The relevance attributed by social workers to the idea of connecting users with goods and services is not surprising given the limited welfare structure and the lack of universal social rights in Chile (Barros et al., 1996; Garretón, 2012; Leyton and Muñoz, 2016). After the implementation of the Social Protection System in 2000, which created a vast array of new social programmes, the idea of connection between users and social services and programmes became even more relevant (CEPAL, 2015). Many potential users, especially those who live in isolated communities, are unaware that they are entitled to access these services. In addition, the relatively fast proliferation of programmes has represented a major challenge in terms of co-ordinating diverse public services (Cunill et al., 2013). This may explain the relevance that coordinating actions with other social services have for all the interviewees, independently of their approach to social exclusion.

The idea of social exclusion underpinning Chilean social policy has been closer to the solidarity paradigm identified by Silver (1994) in the French context. In all the documents analysed, social exclusion is defined as the rupture of bonds which connect the individual with the society (Barros et al., 1996; NCOP, 1996; Ministry of Planning, 2002; Ministry of

Social Development, 2017). However, our findings suggest an inconsistency between this concept of social exclusion embedded in government policy and the social workers' accounts of their practice. Social exclusion, as described in the solidarity paradigm, needs to be addressed by recomposing diverse type of social bonds: between individuals and community, between different communities, between communities and the state and the larger society (Silver, 1994). Such an understanding of connection may lead to interventions that challenge structural mechanisms that reinforce social exclusion (Taket et al., 2009). In contrast, all the interviewees pointed out that their interventions consisted of connecting individual users only with the available social programmes, disregarding other types of connection. Some of them reflected on the complex nature of addressing social exclusion from such a structural perspective, pointing out that their actions were constrained by the need to meet performance targets set by the state. The World Bank's approach underlying the Social Protection System, which promotes the link between individual users and social services (Holzman and Jørgensen, 2000), has clearly influenced the way the social workers approached their interventions and how they prioritised actions in practice.

Lack of access to goods and services is widely accepted in the literature as a key dimension of both poverty and social exclusion (Room, 1995; Taket et al., 2009; Pierson, 2016). Yet the state's approach on social exclusion as reflected in the practices of social workers assumes that there are goods and services available for all and that the problem lies with the users' lack of knowledge on how to best take advantage of the "structure of opportunities". Despite most of the social workers recognising the failure of the neoliberal model to provide a universal coverage of social rights, when explaining their interventions, they did not question the availability or quality of such goods and services. The focus of interventions is the individual to be connected rather than the structure, as "the structure of opportunities" is not questioned at all. This makes clear that the dominant approach of the participants' interventions is the individual, despite the dominance of a structural rhetoric when reflecting on the idea of social exclusion.

### *Neoliberalism and resistance in Chilean social policy*

The findings in this study identified how "the supreme worth of the individual" (Harvey, 2007: 21), the cornerstone of neoliberal rationality underlying Chilean social policy, has been adopted by social workers in their daily practices. Most of the participants' views and practices can be interpreted as concrete expressions of such a phenomenon. The eclecticism which masks individualising perspectives and the noticeable focus on

individual disconnection from the structure of social services are some examples of that. Although most of the participants stated that the neoliberal model caused social exclusion, a neoliberal rationality pervaded accounts of their work as the interviews progressed. This served to illustrate how neoliberal rationality is assumed and reproduced as common sense appearing in a subtle manner in people's daily experiences, either blaming service users or imposing market discipline (Choudhury, 2017; Feldman, 2017; Shakespeare et al., 2016; Whitworth 2016).

In Chile, the neoliberal model was imposed through violence and repression during the dictatorship period. This posits a complex scenario in which the possibilities of imagining alternative projects for society are reduced because of fear, depoliticisation and/or distrust in collective action. This lethargy -an inheritance from the dictatorship- appears to be still blocking the possibilities of discussing and implementing social policy from a critical approach, which demands social workers to be aware of possible gaps between rhetoric and practice. The participants' structural discourses on social exclusion became diluted as the interviews progressed, turning into individual-based perspectives and sometimes into approaches that stigmatised the poor. Similarly, their structural accounts became eclipsed as they proceeded to describe their interventions. In addition, the World Bank's approach has not only reinforced individual-based explanations of social exclusion but also has put a strong emphasis on the achievement of outcomes (set according to individual service users) which diverts social workers' attention away from structural reflections on their work (Álvarez Leguizamón, 2011).

Chilean NGOs, which occupied a core role in criticising the development and implementation of neoliberal policies from the dictatorship period, since the 1990s have become largely co-opted by the same neoliberal model as a result of their financial dependence on the state's funds (Garretón, 2012). The gap between rhetoric and practice has been reinforced by the precarious labour conditions of social workers implementing social programmes, as the relatively short duration of the intervention process and professional turnover experienced by the teams inhibit the possibilities of reflecting and learning from the experiences gained throughout the implementation of social policy. This is a very relevant topic considering the key role of frontline professionals in translating social policy to service users (Leyton, 2015).

Our interviewee findings suggest that Chilean social policy has changed in its approach in recent years. Although addressing social exclusion is still part of its guidelines, the approach has moved from a focus on recomposing social bonds in a broad sense (during the 1990s) to a focus on the capacity of individuals in generating (functional) bonds with



the available structure of social services (since 2000). Documents produced by both organisations since the implementation of the Social Protection System show how guidelines orienting social workers' interventions follow strictly the Chilean state's approach, that is, the World Bank's approach. Such an approach favours individualism, privatisation, and reduction of the state's role, as it assumes that individuals are free to operate as they choose (Álvarez Leguizamón, 2011). Hence, the neoliberal approach of social policy promoted by the supranational agencies, funded by the Chilean state and implemented by NGOs in Chile, is based on the idea of individual responsibility, which is reflected in the discourses adopted by most of the social workers participating in this study. With such an understanding of social exclusion, the neoliberal idea of liberty appears as a promise, under the slogan of having control over one's own life - an expression found in both the organisations' guidelines. That is, freedom to choose (social services and programmes) rather than freedom or liberty as non-domination and based on positive rights (Kahn, 2013; Stonehouse et al., 2015; Whitworth, 2016).

However, and although applying to a minority of participants, this research has shown that despite these organisational structures, it is possible for social workers to adopt a structural approach on social exclusion in their interventions. A discretionary space, although constrained, provides opportunities to adopt a more critical perspective in practice by revisiting the issue of redistribution of resources and power. The use of such a room for manoeuvre by some participants has been interpreted in this article as an act of resistance. Contesting the very configuration of Chilean society - that is, a society characterised by an authoritarian culture - through the promotion of citizen's control among the socially excluded population, is interpreted as a counter-hegemonic practice.

Our analysis affirms that the idea of resistance, which is underlying the strategy of disputing power, as mentioned by some social workers, is more a subtle - than a radical - version of resistance (Baines, 2008; Prior and Barnes, 2011; Gal and Weiss-Gal, 2013). The idea of disputing power is located at a local scale only, which means that these social workers proposed modifications to patterns of democracy within local territories by raising awareness among Mayors on the relevance of democratic governance. There is no suggestion, on the part of the interviewees, of the generation of links between the targeted communities with other communities or with regional, national or global social movements which can be a way of activating community power on a wider scale. In addition, their action is focused on negotiation and consensus rather than on highlighting conflict and power asymmetry.

However, that these social workers did not attempt to radically transform the hegemonic state does not mean that within the Chilean context these initiatives do not have particular significance. Although nearly three decades have passed since the end of the dictatorship, issues related to the redistribution of power in society remain almost untouched (Garretón, 2012). Practices of clientelism and patronage are still common in policy implementation, and service users are generally not engaged in community activism and political mobilisation (Gaudichaud, 2015). In such a context, the efforts made by social workers to promote citizen control (however small) can be understood as an attempt to politicise their practices and counteract power imbalances in policy implementation, which is interpreted here as a small but significant contribution to rethinking strategies to address social exclusion from a structural view.

## **Conclusions**

Drawing upon the overall study findings discussed above, the article has identified how neoliberal rationality has impacted on the way in which NGO social workers understand and address social exclusion in Chile, whilst at the same time it has brought to light strategies employed by some of them as a means of defying such a rationality.

Understanding the process of implementation of social policy from a critical tradition entails two main assumptions: first, that it is the acknowledgment of oppression imposed by hegemonic powers which enables us to exert resistance to them; and second, that a solid understanding of how hegemonic powers work is crucial to imagine and undertake alternative professional projects (Garrett, 2013). This approach is particularly relevant in Latin American countries, Chile included, as social exclusion takes place in a post-dictatorial era in which democratic regimes are not fully consolidated yet, characterised by significant inequality gaps, weak welfare systems, and limited coverage of social rights. Practices of resistance in the implementation of social policies can potentially contribute to the redistribution of power, which is not only relevant, but also urgent, in the consideration of policies tackling social exclusion in the Chilean context.

Considering the study findings, some challenges for improving the implementation of Chilean social policy from a critical approach are identified. Training courses for social workers and other professionals involved in the implementation of social policy need to be examined. Schools of social work have a critical role in discussing theoretical approaches underpinning social policy, analysing gaps between rhetoric and practice, and promoting, as Levitas (2012) asserts, the imagination of alternative projects of society

among current and future social workers and policymakers. Related to this, we identify that the reactivation of social workers' professional bodies is also a vital task. We suggest that professional bodies exert a more prominent role in affecting social policy from a bottom-up approach, disseminating frontline social workers' counter-hegemonic initiatives, promoting public engagement in the construction of social policies, and encouraging collective practices of resistance against neoliberal discourses operating at a local, national and global scale. Professional and academic social work bodies need to work together to problematise and make visible the precarious labour conditions of social workers and other professionals implementing social policies in Chile. If we expect that social workers promote practices of resistance in their interventions with service users, we need to reinforce a critical perspective in social work education, to expand social workers' imaginations and possibilities to resist the neoliberal rationality underlying the provision of social services in Chile. All these efforts can be more effective counteracting the neoliberal rationale of social policy from a reflective and transformative perspective.

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